

--MACDONALD AND HARRIS--

—  
Anne Savage



6th lecture - MacDonald and Harris

-1-

We are now entering the post-war period of Canadian Art.

The news of Thomson's death came as a great shock to his friends, and it was a sad little group that met to talk things over. They felt for a moment as if all their dreams of a fine strong interpretation of the country were over. But the truth was borne in on them that Thomson's spirit was still there, true and constant as the North itself, and so they set out to carry on - to seek the character of the country in whatever locality they found themselves.

The Group of Seven therefore evolved naturally in 1920 without any conscious formation. The members of the now famous Group were: LAWREN HARRIS, A.Y. JACKSON, A. LISMER, J.E.H. MACDONALD, F. VARLEY, F. CARMICHAEL, and F. JOHNSTONE, and EDWIN HOLGATE of Montreal became a member in 1928.

I shall only have time to deal with the first four, and to-day I shall begin with J.E.H. MacDonald and Lawren Harris, two very different individuals.

J.E.H. MacDonald should have been called the poet-painter, for as well as the gift of colour and line he was endowed with the gift of words. He had an interesting Canadian background, his grandfather having served in the garrisons of the Maritimes, Quebec and Toronto. He married a Canadian girl in Nova Scotia whose people had come out to North America in 1630. Sometimes he would be sent with a detachment of troops to Fort Garry, travelling the Northern Route up the Labrador Coast across Hudson Bay by boat and overland to the Middle West. As a lad MacDonald heard many tales of the



terrible year his grandparents had when they were frozen in on the Hudson Bay.

MacDonald's father returned to England and J.E.H. was born in Durham in 1873. He came to Canada at the age of thirteen, filled with curiosity to see the land which held so many thrilling stories connected with his own people, and so he was imbued with sympathy and understanding of the homely simple things in Canada, and these are vividly reflected in his painting and poetry.

MacDonald studied Art for a short time at Hamilton, and at Central Ontario College of Art, Toronto. Later he entered the Art department of the photo-engraving firm of Grip.

After the week's work at the office was over MacDonald would fill the week-end by making sketches in the neighbourhood of his home north of High Park. By 1911 he had accumulated a considerable number of sketches and held his first exhibition in the Arts and Letters Club in November of that year. He had been long known as an excellent designer, but this first exhibition came as a considerable surprise to his fellow artists.

Mr. C.W. Jeffries, R.C.A. wrote of it: "Mr. MacDonald's art is native, native as the rocks and the snow on pine trees that are so largely his theme. In these sketches there is a refreshing absence of Europe or anything else save Canada. MacDonald seems to be able to forget what other men have selected and how other men have expressed themselves and in an age of such universal information as ours and a country so provincial and imitative in its tastes as Canada, these qualities are rare."

This then was the excellent beginning.



MacDonald did his own thinking and when the culminating forces produced the new movement he was there ready to join it and to contribute the richness of his own strong convictions that Canada's strange and impelling beauty had never yet been expressed fully in paint.

He, too, came under the spell of the North and in his interpretation of it he stressed the decorative quality just as Thomson did. He, too, saw the pine trees and was compelled to write:

Had I the power of line and form  
That soul-selected best  
No time to paint that drooping Pine  
Against a fading West.

Or could I take it with a thought  
And press it in a book  
For all to see the trees that stand  
When spirit turns to look.

Only a tree, in muddy field  
Seen with the body's eye  
To spirit stood at heaven's gate  
Against eternal sky.

Working up to 1916 MacDonald's painting gained in breadth of handling and richness of colour. He had a remarkable love of greens and gives them to us in all their varieties from the bronze greens of the cedars to the silver grey green of the feathery tamarack, the dark masses of the spruce and the wooded hills of emerald tipped poplar, and against this background he loved to fling a note of pure vermilion.

One of the first large paintings embracing this fuller understanding of his medium was the Tangled Garden. Here the designer took full rein and with superb self-confidence painted a picture with the decorative beauty of an oriental rug. To-day we would consider it quite orthodox. Thanks to Thomson and MacDonald we have become quite accustomed to accepting the decorative point of view.







LAWRENCE HARRIS came into the picture about the same time as MacDonald and Thomson. He had returned from studying Art in Germany after a half-completed university course. He started in 1910 to look for design and inspiration in the back streets of Toronto, and he produced some very interesting works full of vitality and showing a definite interest in the large decorative approach. His dynamic personality soon reached out for bigger fields, which such kindred spirits as Jackson and Thomson responded to. Harris' name was known all over Canada through his grandfather's genius in making agricultural implements. Harris cared nothing about business or finance, but he had ideas, - very definite ideas - about Canadian Art, which at that time was much more like Old World Art than it is to-day. One idea was to have a building where artists could work, and having the means to put it into effect, he and Dr. James MacCallum proceeded to erect the Studio Building, the rents to cover the expenses with no profit on the investment. In January 1914, Jackson and Thomson moved into the first real Studio building in the country. By the end of the year the war was a disturbing factor. Jackson returned to Montreal to go overseas. Thomson moved into a carpenter's shop in the rear of the building and Harris became an instructor of musketry.

1919, - and life stirring in the Studio Building again. Harris has more ideas - renting a box car on the Algoma Central Railway, filling it full of artists and leaving it on a siding - a movable Studio: then came the North Shore of Lake Superior where Harris gets into his stride.



Harris painted with a greater simplification than any of the others and gradually he reduced his canvases to accenting only the dominant form of the landscape and with this technique he was enabled to capture the great expanses of light and space which he found on the shores of Lake Superior. He reduced his colour range to tones of blues and greens, silvers and blacks which enhanced the mood of profound stillness. One feels when contemplating his works as if lifted into an atmosphere of clear light - abstract, cold, impersonal beauty; it is like listening to a composition by Bach.

Harris crashes through all trivialities and gives us his grand theme of tone and form. He alone of the Group could interpret the Rockies in their towering masses, and when in 1930 he and Jackson went up to the Arctic his sketches of the icebergs, one glistening form after another against the cold Northern skies, showed that he had found another exquisite field for his exploitation.

In 1931 the Pan-American Exhibition, which included Canada in the works of all the Americas, awarded Harris 2nd prize for his canvas, "The Shores of Lake Superior". Here on the rocky shore of that inland sea, the magnificent shaft of a weathered, silvered tree stump lifts its cleft form against a dramatic sky of broken shafts of light which sweep through rolling clouds and strike on the far surface of the glistening, still water.

Harris' contribution to the development of painting in this country was a greater insistence upon form and tone. No longer does the flat purely decorative theme satisfy, but each section of the landscape is developed in tone relationships and forms become solid masses surrounded with air. Harris pushed this development to its farthest



6th lect. MacDonald & Harris -7-

point, he clears every vestige of realism out of his work. He has done much to make us realize that construction, design, balance of weight and tone values are the basic things in a picture, and to him, above all, the mood it conveys.

To quote his own words: "The source of our Art is not in the achievements of other artists, in other days and lands, although it has learned a great deal from these. Our Art is founded on a long and growing love and understanding of the North, in an ever-clearer experience with the informing spirit of the whole land and a strange brooding sense of Mother Nature fostering a new race and a new age."

To-day, Lawren Harris<sup>is</sup> following the inevitable urge in painting abstractions or non-objective Art - where his ideas will take him - what new worlds of colour and form to discover we can only surmise, - but no one can question the honesty or sincerity of his efforts.

Next week we will hear about A.Y. Jackson and Arthur Lismer

---